



More Than a Minor Field Study: Growth Through Research, Travel, and Friendships in Colombia

Before arrival

Before our departure to Bogotá, Colombia, there was a lot to think about and many things to prepare. We are two students who decided to write our master's thesis abroad, and we knew from the beginning that we wanted an international experience. We started by exploring interesting thesis proposals on the KTH website and eventually came across a project that really caught our attention. It focused on integrating satellite data with community-based observations to improve wetland monitoring. We contacted SEI (Stockholm Environment Institute) directly, were invited to an interview, and secured the internship connected to the thesis.

To finance our stay, we searched extensively for scholarships. We ended up applying to several, and some of them might be useful for you as well:

MFS (Minor Field Studies), Åforsk stipendium, Ernst Johnson fond, Sveriges Ingenjörer, Anna Whitlocks stipendium, and Irisstipendium.

The ones we were granted that were related to our thesis were MFS and Åforsk stipendium. We also received the Ernst Johnson fond, which was not specifically tied to our thesis. Even though we didn't receive all the scholarships we applied for, it was definitely worth trying!

Health preparations were also important. We contacted a vaccination clinic, where we were informed that yellow fever, Hepatitis A, and Hepatitis B were the mandatory vaccinations. For stomach protection, Dukoral and Vivotif were recommended. However, always make sure to double-check the latest recommendations, as they may change depending on the situation.

Finding accommodation was another crucial step. We attended the KTH Global Day and connected with people who had been to Colombia before or were originally from Colombia. That's where we met and became friends that could help us navigate the accommodation process. We booked our flights and accommodation in a way that kept our stay under 90 days, so we did not need to apply for a visa.

Regarding language preparation, one of us is fluent in Spanish and the other had studied it in school. We didn't take any additional language courses beforehand, but we strongly recommend having an advanced level of Spanish. Most interactions during the project, especially those involving local communities in the field, were conducted entirely in Spanish and required a good command of the language.

Before departure, one of our fellow MFS students sent out an email to the rest of the group asking if anyone else was planning to stay in Bogotá. This was an amazing idea, as it led us to connect with her

and eventually book an Airbnb together. She also reached out to the Swedish Embassy to get in touch with Swedish interns living in Bogotá, another fantastic move that made our experience in Bogotá so much more enjoyable. Thanks to her initiative, we already had local contacts who could show us around, share tips, and help us settle in. We ended up making lots of new friends, so we would highly recommend doing the same!

Upon arrival

Upon arrival in Bogotá, we had arranged a taxi in advance through a Colombian friend who helped us book it via WhatsApp. The driver met us at the airport, and we paid in cash, although we had agreed on 60,000 COP, we gave him 70,000 COP as a small tip.

Since our flight landed at 4 AM, we had coordinated with our accommodation for an early check-in, which made the arrival much smoother.

Bogotá is located at an altitude of 2640 meters above sea level, and one of us experienced a mild headache due to the elevation. We recommend drinking plenty of water, getting rest, and having headache medicine easily available during your first days.



We arrived a couple of weeks after the official start of the thesis course, so we scheduled a meeting with our supervisors at Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) just two days after settling in. Since our thesis was done in collaboration with SEI, we also brought Swedish candy to the office (picture above) and a bigger thank-you gift for our main supervisor to show our appreciation, something that was warmly received and seemed to make a positive impression.

Financials

We chose to live in a relatively upscale area of Bogotá called Chapinero, known for its many restaurants which we highly recommend! Our main reasons were safety and closeness to the office. This choice naturally impacted our expenses, so our experience may differ from others depending on where they decide to stay.

Our accommodation was booked through Airbnb and cost around 12,000 SEK per month. It included two bedrooms (each with a double bed), two bathrooms, a kitchen, and a shared living room with a sofa bed. We split the rent between three-four people, which helped keep the cost manageable.



Eating out at a regular restaurant typically cost around 30,000 COP (approximately 70 SEK), but it was often cheaper at lunchtime, around 17,000 COP (about 40 SEK). The lunch menus usually included generous portions, and we often had enough food to split into two meals. The pictures above show two typical Colombian foods, Ajiaco and Bandeja Paisa.



Fruit and vegetables were very affordable, especially on Wednesdays when the supermarket Carulla offered 30% off (picture on the left). We did most of our grocery shopping at Carulla since it had everything we needed, although we later found out that it's considered one of the more expensive supermarkets. For lower prices, a huge tip is to visit local fruit markets which are often big and very affordable (picture on the right), and smaller chain stores like Tiendas D1, Ara, and DollarCity are great alternatives.

Clothes shopping in our area wasn't particularly cheap, stores like ZARA and H&M had similar or even higher prices than in Sweden. However, we discovered some nice second-hand shops in the neighborhood, which were more affordable and sustainable.

Food and general expenses were noticeably lower outside of Bogotá. When we travelled to other cities, we mostly chose to fly, domestic flights typically ranged from 500 to 2,000 SEK, depending on how early we booked. For our trip to Medellín, however, we chose to take a night bus, which was a

more budget-friendly alternative. The journey felt safe and relatively comfortable, although traveling through the mountainous regions can involve a lot of bumps and sharp turns.

Accommodation



A good tip is to do some research on safe areas to live in Bogotá before you go. We were told by a local friend that, generally speaking, the further north you go in the city, the more upscale and safe the neighborhoods tend to be. We stayed in Chapinero, specifically in Zona G, and felt very safe, surrounded by a lot of greenery, great restaurants, cafés, and bars. The picture above shows a street view of our neighbourhood.

Bogotá is a large, lively city that never really sleeps, which means the traffic can be intense at all hours. It's hard not to notice the noise, whether it's cars, dogs, or general street activity, even at night. Also, keep in mind that most homes lack proper insulation, so depending on the season, it can get very cold indoors at night. Be sure to bring warm clothes for sleeping!

Project

Our master's thesis was carried out in collaboration with Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) at their Latin America office in Bogotá. The project focused on combining satellite data with community-based monitoring to improve the understanding of water quality in urban wetlands. The goal was to develop methods and tools that could be used by both local communities and decision-makers to monitor wetland conditions and support sustainable management.

No day at SEI was ever quite the same, our workdays were very diverse and depended on where we were in the project. Sometimes we worked from the office and sometimes from home, typically starting around 8 AM. Tasks ranged from analyzing satellite imagery and writing our thesis report to preparing field visits and developing workshop materials.

Once a week, we participated in a meeting with SEI's water team, where colleagues shared updates on their work. These meetings provided us with valuable insights into our own project as well as a deeper understanding of how a research institute operates and collaborates.



During our time at SEI, we also went on field trips to wetlands in Bogotá and arranged workshops (picture above), where we met with local community members and environmental organizations. These experiences allowed us to connect theory with practice and gain a deeper understanding of the social and ecological context of our study.

At the end of our internship, we presented our results to the institute. This gave the team an opportunity to ask many questions, and we were also able to provide feedback on our experience working there.

Country

When we weren't caught up writing our thesis, we managed to find time to do quick trips outside of Bogotá. Sometimes this involved taking our laptops with us and writing in coffee shops or beaches but better than writing in rainy Bogotá right ;)



Our first trip took us to Santa Marta, Minca, and Tayrona. It was a five-day getaway filled with beautiful beaches, lively parties, coffee and cacao tours, and breathtaking scenery. We highly recommend visiting Tayrona for its magnificent beaches (picture to the right!).



One of us also squeezed in a quick weekend trip to the stunning island of San Andrés, located closer to Nicaragua than mainland Colombia. It's a solid snorkeling and diving spot, with crystal-clear waters and vibrant marine life. The streets were buzzing with music, laughter, and people dancing late into the night. Compared to other places in Colombia, the island had a distinct culture and even the language felt different, experiencing the Caribbean side of Colombia was definitely a highlight.



Our last trip was to Medellín, where we saw a Shakira concert, explored the colorful streets of Comuna 13, and took a day trip to climb up Guatapé (middle picture). One thing we noticed in Medellín was that we felt a bit less safe walking around, especially at night, so it's good to stay aware of your surroundings. After Medellín, we headed to the Eje Cafetero region, where we toured coffee farms, relaxed in natural hot springs, and hiked through the iconic Cocora Valley (right picture).

Leisure and social activities



During our free time, we enjoyed a variety of leisure and social activities. We often went dancing at local studios, especially Bureo Dance Studio and Sin Visa, and went out for social salsa dancing. On Sundays, we ran along the Ciclovía, a popular car-free route on one of Bogotá's biggest roads, where many people were running, biking, and stopping to enjoy fresh juices along the way. We also hiked up to Monserrate (two pictures on the right) and visited common sightseeing places. As an activity, we played tejo, a traditional Colombian game that felt a bit like the Swedish game kubb, but with metal discs and small explosions, which made it even more fun!



The city offers many cultural events like food festivals (as in the picture), art exhibitions, and concerts (there's always something happening) and you can easily find out about events through Instagram, Google, or TikTok. We also took the chance to travel and explore different parts of Colombia, which we describe more in the 'Country' section.

Bogotá has many beautiful parks and green spaces, perfect for relaxing or spending time outdoors. We recommend to visit Jardín Botánico de Bogotá José Celestino Mutis! We loved visiting fruit markets to try a wide variety of fresh tropical fruits, you can't go wrong with their mango and mangosteen. Shopping second-hand was another favorite activity, with several great thrift stores nearby. And of

course, you can't be in Colombia without trying their coffee! We recommend cafes like Casa Café Cultor, Café Amor Perfecto, and Tropicalia Coffee.

For socializing, the city has many great bars, and there's also "Gringo Tuesday," a weekly event where you can practice any language you want and meet a diverse crowd of internationals and Colombians alike.

Sustainability

We relied on Uber quite a bit during our time in Bogotá. While it's not the most sustainable option, it was comfortable, affordable, and felt safer. However, we mostly walked to work and didn't travel with Uber more than necessary. Unfortunately, eating out in Bogotá often means meat-based meals, but when we cooked at home, we tried to buy fresh, locally produced fruits and vegetables.

Our project itself was strongly focused on sustainability. We aimed to develop sustainable methods for monitoring wetlands by actively involving local communities. This research directly contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, with a particular focus on improving water quality (Target 6.3) and protecting water-related ecosystems (Target 6.6). Additionally, the project supports SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities by highlighting the role of wetlands in reducing flood risks (Target 11.5) and preserving urban green spaces (Target 11.7). It also contributes to SDG 13: Climate Action by promoting adaptation strategies (Target 13.1) and enhancing local capacity to monitor and respond to environmental changes.

Other recommendations and observations

These are our main recommendations based on our experiences in Colombia:

- **Buy your departure ticket before arrival:** It's a good idea to have your return or onward travel ticket booked in advance. Some immigration officers may ask to see proof of your departure from the country, so having this ready can help avoid any issues at the border.
- **Carry some cash:** While cards are widely accepted in many places, having cash on hand is essential, especially for taxis, small shops, or markets that might not accept cards. It's also useful for tipping or emergencies.
- **Download the Revolut app:** We mainly used Revolut, which is a convenient digital banking app that allows you to manage money internationally with low fees and good exchange rates. Having it installed before you travel can make handling foreign currency and payments easier.
- **Write down your accommodation address:** Sometimes your phone battery may die or lose signal, and you'll still need to provide the address of where you're staying, especially at customs or when meeting a taxi driver. Keeping a written copy of your accommodation address handy can save you stress and help you get to your destination smoothly, trust us!
- **Have clear expectations:** Make sure you set clear expectations when starting your thesis and internship, because sometimes things didn't go exactly as we had imagined. The local supervisor could be a bit confusing at times, and meeting all the deadlines was challenging since expectations weren't clearly communicated from the start. There can also be some cultural differences in how work is approached compared to what we're used to in Sweden, so be open and transparent!

Don't hesitate to contact us if you would like to know more!

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